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ABSTRACT

Superintendents and principals from 50 Pennsylvania school districts were asked to complete two questionnaires each to test, first, the relationships between superintendents' and principals' role conflict and ambiguity and, second, the relationship between superintendents' role conflict and ambiguity and their perceptions of their districts' organizational characteristics. Likert's Profile of a School and Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman's Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale were the two instruments used to gather the data, which came from school systems in every nonmetropolitan intermediate district in the state. Statistical analysis of the data revealed no apparent relationships between superintendents' and principals' levels of role conflict and role ambiguity, or between superintendents' role conflict and their perceptions of organizational characteristics. A negative relationship was noted between superintendents' role ambiguity and their perceptions of organizational characteristics. Superintendents and their principals were found to share perceptions of organizational management, though superintendents tended to believe their systems more open and participative than did principals. A related finding was that the more open superintendents felt their systems to be, the less role conflict and ambiguity were expressed by principals. This paper concludes with comments on the effects of demographic variables and a discussion of the implications of the findings. (Author/PGD)

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The Relationship of Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Perceived Organizational Characteristics Between Superintendents and Principals

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Presentation Paper

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The Relationship of Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Perceived Organizational Characteristics Between Superintendents and Principals

Introduction

The once embraced belief that school districts were free from many of the conflict-related pressures which often entangled other organizations has been reconciled to the realities of militant teacher unions, public sector collective bargaining, and increased demands by society for more accountability and operational efficiency. Under present circumstance conflict more than consensus is a part of the natural order. With organizational complexity and the need for school administrators at all levels to accommodate a spectrum of pluralistic values and expectations, role conflict and role ambiguity seem unavoidable. "Ambiguity is an important and common element of the leadership setting. The school executive in particular, lives in a world that is frequently inconsistent. He must set policy in the face of conflicting public demands and internal factions."[1]

Past studies of management behavior in the educational field has basically centered around the principal; research has been conducted to identify and assess the presence and effects of role conflict and role ambiguity. Traditionally, the principal has been considered as the most influencial factor in determining climate, direction, and leadership of a school; however, while the organizational position of the principal has not been altered, the role of the superintendent has increased in influence. The superintendent is replacing the principal on the educational hierarchy as the dominant official resulting in the labelling of the principal as the middle-man with quasi-management authority.[2]

Studies which assess the degree of role conflict and role ambiguity at the superintendent's level, and how these pressures may filter through the administrative ranks to the principal of the district are lacking. It was the design of this investigation to gain insight into this relationship, along with assessing the similarities and differences between superintendents and principals with respect to perceived organizational characteristics.

Background of Research

The conceptual framework for this study was based on theoretical and research findings in four significant areas from the industrial and educational sector. Perceiving human conduct resulting from an interaction between role and personality, Getzels and Guba developed a theoretical model of social behavior. Based on their research, two sets of motivators, each outlining a particular dimension, are significant in producing behavior. The nomethetic dimension consists of the individual, personality, and need-dispositions (Figure 1). A given act is conceived as deriving simultaneously from both dimensions. "Behavior results as the individual attempts to cope with the environment composed of patterns of expectations for his behavior in ways consistent with his own independent patterns of needs", concludes the authors.[3]

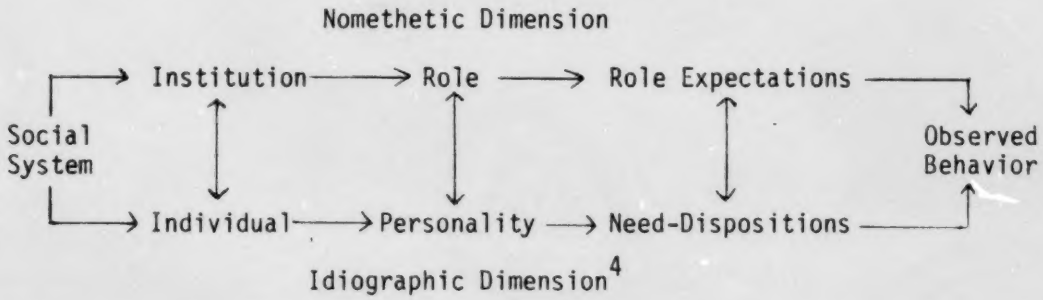

Figure 1

When the interaction between need-disposition and role expectation is compatible, role conflict will be minimal. But role expectations can vary in direction, clarity, and intensity.[5]

In a study of factory workers conducted by Kahn and others, findings indicate that 35 percent of the labor force surveyed were disturbed by the lack of clarity of their job responsibilities with 29 percent being bothered by ambiguity about what their peers expected of them. Thirty-eight percent were distressed because they lacked the required information to perform their job adequately. The findings indicated a positive relationship existed between role ambiguity and tension, futility, and dissatisfaction. Ambiguity concerning how the person's role person's role performance was evaluated and found to be significantly related to higher levels of tension and lower levels of self-confidence.[6]

Data collected from 105 school districts in Massachusetts, lead Gross, Mason, and McEachern to conclude: the greater the conformity between actions of school boards and their superintendent's expectations, the greater the superintendent's satisfaction with his position and with the school board. The researchers also perceived differences in expectations made upon the superintendents which resulted in role conflicts in such areas as hiring and promotion, budgeting recommendations, and time allocations. They also concluded that the perception of these four areas of role conflict was not likely to affect the superintendent's satisfaction with his career as it was to affect his satisfaction with, and to a lesser extent, worry over his current job.[7]

Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman developed a role conflict and ambiguity scale for the purpose of identifying management problems and needs before the implementation of a planned management development program in a manufacturing company. The two role constructs of conflict and ambiguity were related to measures of organizational and management practices, leadership behavior, satisfaction, anxiety, propensity to leave, and demographic variables. They found that high role conflict and role ambiguity tended to be related to goal conflict and inconsistency, lack of accurate information, delay in decisions, and chain of command not properly utilized.[8]

Evidence suggests that there is a significant relationship between role ambiguity and job satisfaction in respect to the role of the administrator, along with productivity, attainment of goals, participation, anxiety, decision-making, self-confidence, and other variables. Role conflict has been viewed as being related to many of the same variables. It would seem reasonable to conclude that the type of administrative relationship established between the superintendent and his building principals may be an important indicator of the amount and source of role conflict and role ambiguity experienced at all administrative levels of the educational organization. Previous research by Doremus[9] clearly indicated that principal role conflict and ambiguity were related to both the similarity of superintendent/ principal organizational perceptions as well as the principal's perception of the management behavior of the superintendent.

Statement of Hypothesis

Based upon the aforementioned theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were developed and tested in this study.

1. There is a positive relationship between a superintendent's role conflict and the role conflict of building principals in the school district.
2. There is a positive relationship between a superintendent's role ambiguity and the role ambiguity of building principal's in the school district.
3. There is a positive relationship between a superintendent's perception of organizational characteristics and the perception of organizational characteristics by building principals in the school district.
4. There is a negative relationship between the superintendent's role conflict and his perception of the organizational characteristics.
5. There is a negative relationship between the superintendent's role ambiguity and his perception of the organizational characteristics.

The Sample

The sample consisted of 50 school districts. Two districts from each of Pennsylvania's 27 intermediate units were chosen through random selection. Only non-metropolitan districts were considered (eliminating Philadelphia and Pittsburgh's schools). Any district that failed to have independent administrative units at the senior high, junior/ middle school, and the elementary school levels was also eliminated. The

survey reported information collected from 45 superintendents, 31 senior high principals, 34 junior high/middle school principals, and 65 elementary principals resulting in the analysis of 45 school district units of usable data. One criterion for school district units was the participation of at least a superintendent, one secondary principal, and one elementary principal.

Procedures

Two instruments were used in this study for the collection of data. (1) Likert's Profile of a School, Form 5 for principals and Form 7 for superintendents both consisted of 101 questions designed to assess the individual's perception of his district's organizational characteristics. The responses are designed to place the district along a four system continuum ranging from closed to open (or as Likert describes: from exploitive-authoritative to a participative system). Each administrator received the appropriate questionnaire for his position in the organization; (2) Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman's Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale was also sent to each administrator regardless of position. The scale consisted of questions to assess the degree of ambiguity and to determine the degree of role conflict expressed by the respondent.

Statistical significance at or beyond the .05 level of confidence was required to retain each of the stated hypotheses. The Spearman rank-order correlation co-efficient was used to measure the quantitative relationships as well as relationships between demographic variables. Demographic information was sought so that similarities and trends might be viewed as they relate to the hypotheses. All respondents were asked

to complete the following items: sex, age, number of years in education, number of years in administration, and number of years in present position. Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance test was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences among the four administrative groups with respect to the variables in this investigation.

Findings

Neither Hypotheses One or Two were statistically supported by the findings. No apparent relationship existed between the superintendents and his principals with respect to role conflict and role ambiguity. These findings may indicate that with special reference to role patterns, responsibilities, and expectations, many of the role components of the superintendent are mutually independent of building principals.

Hypothesis Three was statistically significant beyond the .05 level of confidence. This finding indicated that as the superintendent tended to assume a particular management perspective, his principals tended to express a similar view of organizational management. A computed correlation of 0.2496 appears to support the view that perceived organizational characteristics are indicators of actual organizational characteristics. However, the average Profile of a school score for the principals was found to be significantly lower than that of their superintendents. Indicating that superintendents tended to perceive their management systems more "open" and "participative" than their building principals.

Stating that there would be a significant negative relationship between a superintendent's role conflict and his perception of the

organization, Hypothesis Four failed to be supported through cor relation analysis. This finding supported the assumption that the nature and degree of role conflict associated with a superintendent's board, community interactions or issues are independent from his perceptions of the organizational characteristics and internal management style.

Hypothesis Five stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between the superintendent's role ambiguity and his perception of the organizational characteristics. A computed correlation co-efficient of 0.3220, statistically significant beyond the .02 level of confidence, was found to support this relationship. This finding showed that if superintendents were not clear as to the nature of their role expectations and role responsibilities they were prone to view their organizational systems as being "closed" and "exploitative-authorative."

Additional analysis related to the hypotheses found significant relationships between a superintendent's perception of the organizational characteristics of his school district and the average role conflict and average role ambiguity of his building principals. These results clearly showed that when a superintendent tended to view his district as being "open" and "participative," his building principals expressed significantly lower levels of role conflict and role ambiguity.

Correlation analysis measuring relationship between a building principal's perception of organizational characteristics and his role conflict and role ambiguity found role conflict significant at the 0.5205 level and role ambiguity significant at the 0.6761 level.

These additional findings indicated that (1) the management perspective of the superintendent appeared to have important influence upon the role conflict and role ambiguity experienced by his building principals and (2) the management system as perceived by the principal himself has an influence upon his role conflict and role ambiguity.

Analysis of demographic characteristics, significant beyond the .01 level of confidence, indicated: the more years a superintendent spent in administration, the more likely it was that he learned to cope with conflicting role issues, even though his role expectations may actually have been less well defined. As the variables of a superintendent's age and number of years in service in his present position increased, the Profile of a School score decreased. This significant relationship was such that greater age and service scores were associated with closed or System 1 organizational management orientations. Principals had significantly higher role conflict than their superintendents, as the principal's years in education increased; however, no significant relationships were found to exist between a principal's specific demo graphic characteristics and his expressed role ambiguity. Similar to superintendents, principals' scores revealed a significant relationship between management perspective and the number of years in their present position.

Ancillary findings derived from the Profile of School instrument indicated that the disparity between the organizational climate perceptions of the superintendents and their principals had a negative effect on the principals in terms of increased role conflict and role ambiguity.

No significant relationships existed between the superintendent's estimate of his principal's leadership perceptions scores, the actual leadership perceptions scores of his principals and the superintendent variables of role ambiguity and role conflict.

However, as the differences in scores between the superintendent's estimate of his principals' leadership perceptions and the actual average leadership perceptions of his principals increased, there was a significant increase in both the average role conflict and average role ambiguity, expressed in scores, by the principals. These relationships were significant beyond the .001 level.

When the organizational climate perception of the superintendent and his principals was more congruent and the superintendent's estimate of his principals' leadership perceptions was more closely aligned with the actual leadership perceptions of his principals, the principals expressed lower levels of role conflict and role ambiguity; but, these same perceptions had no appreciable effect on the role conflict and role ambiguity as expressed by the superintendents.

Discussion of Findings

Since the role conflict and role ambiguity of the superintendent has little or no influence on the overall role conflict and role ambiguity of his building principals, it would be unwise to look at a superintendent's expressed levels of role conflict and role ambiguity as being symtomatic of district-wide administrative role problems. These findings lend support to the notion of loose coupling where different administrative units may have dissimilar problems and there is enough distance to diffuse some of the problems associated with other units.

Also, in reference to role patterns, responsibilities, and expectations, many of the role components of the superintendent may be mutally independent of those of his building principal. This finding is consistent with the work of Cohen et al.[10] and Deal and Celotti[11] who view educational organizations as consisting of a loose collection of individuals, units, or levels, each performing activities independently.

Although the principals' perceptions of the organizational characteristics were positively related to those of their superintendents, the superintendents tended to view the organizational structure as significantly more "open" and "participative" than their principals. This finding supported the research of Doremus[10] who found that superintendents as a group viewed their organizations as being more participative and open than that of other administrators in the district.

As superintendents perceived greater levels of role ambiguity, they were found to be more System 1 oriented in their management perspective. This had a special consequence for subordinate administrators. Building principals experienced increased levels of role conflict and role ambiguity when they shared a joint perception with the superintendent of a closed or System 1 type management organization.

If both superintendents and principals were made more aware of these tendencies, they would be better prepared to understand each other's management perspective bias and perhaps lead to more open lines of communication and an overall reduction in specific management problems. Effective changes in management strategies could be devised to help resolve these problems. One such strategy might involve increased communication and sensitivity training.

Administrators tended to view their school system less "open" and less "participative" as their reported age, years in administration, and years in their present position increased. This finding may indicate that as greater age or expertise is gained, less patience is practiced in devising group decisionmaking patterns. It also may indicate a frustration in not achieving identified goals or a conservatism developed over time.

The findings of this study can only become of practical significance if administrators become aware of the relationships between organizational perceptions, role conflict, and role ambiguity. School districts should initiate periodic organizational management assessments in order to determine the nature and extent of differences in these variables. In addition, and of equal importance, is the need to develop effective methods of problem resolution once these management difficulties within the system have been discovered and defined.

Footnotes

[1]William R. Lane, Ronald G. Corwin, and William G. Monahan. Educational Administration: A Behavioral Analysis. New York: MacMillan, 1967, p. 302.

[2]William L. Pharis. "An Open Letter to Superintendents from Middle Management." National Elementary Principal, L (May 1971), 81.

[3]Jacob W. Getzels and Egon G. Guba. "Social Behavior and Administrative Process." The School Review, LXV (Winter 1957), p. 423.

[4]Ibid. p. 423.

[5]Richard A. Gorton. Conflict, Controversy, and Crisis in School Administration and Supervision. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1972, p. 324.

[6]Robert L. Kahn, et al. Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964.

[7]Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason; and Alexander W. McEachern. Explorations in Role Analysis. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1958.

[8]John R. Rizzo, Robert J. House, and Sidney I. Lirtzman. "Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations." Administrative Science Quarterly, June 1970, 150163.

[9]Daniel B. Doremus. "The Relationship Between Elementary Principal Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Organizational Behavior." Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1977.

[10]Elizabeth Cohen and others. "The Relationships Between Classroom Structure and Technology." Educational Sociology, XX, January 1978, pp. 1518.

[11]Terrence E. Deal and Lynn D. Celotti. "How Much Influence Do (and Can) Educational Administrators Have on Classrooms?" Phi Delta Kappan, LXI, March 1980, pp. 471-473.